

Remarks at Medal Ceremony at Lask Military Airbase

Remarks

John Kerry

Secretary of State

Lask Military Airbase

Lask, Poland

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Well, thank you very much, Mr. Minister of Defense. It is an honor for me to be able to be here. It's an honor to be here at the Lask Airbase, one of the most visible and powerful symbols of the enduring alliance between our nations. I have to tell you that it's particularly exciting for us to see these F-16s in back of me. I am a pilot, though I wasn't an F-16 pilot. But it's pretty tempting, and I can tell you that for a member of my traveling team, Colonel Scott Thompson, United States Air Force, is our own top gun traveling with us, a former F-16 Air Force pilot. And I know he'd love to get out of his uniform and go up now and hit the afterburner.

I'm very proud to share with you that the military partnership that we are living here today and that we are building on here today began only a stone's throw away from my home town of Boston. It was in a famous seaport just to the north of Boston called Marblehead, where Casimir Pulaski, the father of the American Cavalry, arrived from Poland more than 230 years ago. And he wrote to General George Washington, "I came here where freedom is being defended to serve it and live and die for it." Here at last, we actually are continuing the work and the partnership that Pulaski began not just in the defense of freedom, but in our work together to defend and promote freedom and prosperity from so many people across the world.

I will have the honor of awarding a Meritorious Service Medal in a few moments to a soldier who embodies this commitment, Lieutenant Colonel Bagan. As the commanding officer of a Polish special operations task group in Afghanistan, he served with great valor. His bravery is a testament to the courage and the character of the Polish people, and it is a perfect example of why the United States is proud to call you among our closest friends.

Of course, Lieutenant Colonel Bagan is not alone in his incredible service and sacrifice. For more than a decade, thousands of Polish men and women stood shoulder to shoulder with American forces in Afghanistan and with our NATO allies and partners. At this airbase, we see clearly that we are not resting on the strength of our alliance; we are investing in it. The American airmen here are the first in our history to be stationed full-time on Polish soil. As they train alongside their Polish partners, they complete some of the most realistic combat simulation, and they use some of the most modern aircraft in Europe. Even as we speak, U.S. and Polish forces are taking part in Steadfast Jazz, a military exercise that will train and test the NATO Response Force.

In the years to come, our ability to respond rapidly to a changing world and to changing threats will be measured by more than just one test. That is why Poland's \$45 billion investment in modernizing its defense forces is so vital to our partnership and the future of the NATO alliance. With this investment, Poland is showing its steadfast commitment to peace and to the security, and it sending a powerful message to all NATO members. Poland is showing that our shared security and shared prosperity requires sharing responsibility for the future.

And I want you to know that the United States is fully ready to help Poland meet that responsibility, as the Defense Minister can readily attest. We believe deeply in the quality of the equipment that is behind me, the F-16s, and in other equipment that we produce. And we are prepared to make that equipment available to Poland as it makes its choices about the future and the continued interoperability demands of NATO.

So I want to thank the Defense Minister for his hospitality here today. This was an opportunity for us to meet and to talk about our goals. But it's also an opportunity for us to underscore the importance of this relationship. In the men and women who serve together here at Lask, we see the ties that bind our two nations together and make us stronger. As we make good on our historic commitment to peace and to prosperity, we look forward to closer cooperation and we look forward to greater partnership in the years to come. We thank our friends in Poland for their steadfast efforts with the United States.